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*David's Grief for the Death of Absalom a
Type of God's Feeling for Sinners.*

A SERMON

PREACHED BY

THE LORD BISHOP OF SALISBURY,

BEFORE THE

CHURCH PENITENTIARY ASSOCIATION,

AT ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, PICCADILLY,

ON

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S E R M O N.

DAVID'S GRIEF FOR THE DEATH OF ABSALOM A TYPE OF GOD'S FEELING FOR SINNERS.

2 SAMUEL, xviii. 33.

“ O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom ! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son ! ”

SUCH was the piteous cry of agony with which David received the tidings of the death of one of his sons.

Absalom had been a murderer, and then had driven his father from his kingdom and throne ; and yet when this son fell in battle against his father, the father was overwhelmed with grief, and would have preferred that his son had succeeded in his most unnatural treason, and that himself had died by the hands of his rebellious subjects.

The words of the Holy Ghost are, “ The king was much moved, and went to the chamber over the gate, and wept ; and as he went, thus he said, ‘ O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom ! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son ! ’ ”

What a most touching and lively account is this, my Brethren, of a parent's grief, who cannot harden his heart against his son, and who finds that the aggravating circumstances of his son's wickedness only throw open with more uncontrollable force the floodgates of his affections ! David's affliction would have been great had Absalom been a dutiful and loving child, but the thought that he had been the means of removing a son from this world in the midst of his sins, caused him an intolerable anguish.

There was indeed in the death of Absalom everything to make the cup of David's sorrows more bitter, and the words of the text prove to us that he drank the very dregs of that most bitter cup; that he was in the deepest agony of grief, when upon hearing that Absalom was dead, the immediate language of his heart was, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

It is not however with the view of dwelling upon Absalom's rebellion and death, or David's great sufferings, that I have taken for my text these words of the First Lesson of this morning's service, but because they open to us a striking view of that most wonderful of all God's attributes, his mercy, and so are well fitted to encourage us to press forward the work, to which the Members of this Association are specially pledged, by assuring our hearts that such labours of love are in most perfect accordance with the good will and pleasure of our Father and our God.

But have I any right thus to see in David's words, which express the feelings of his own heart, any expression of the mind and heart of our God?

The following statement justifies, I think, my doing so.

In the beginning man was made in the image of God, and so all the expressions of his mind and heart were expressions of the image of God. Man represented God. In man you might, as in a mirror, trace the likeness of God.

But this doctrine does not contain the answer to the whole question, and for this reason. Sin had broken the mirror, and after the Fall, the reflection of God's perfections could no longer be seen in man. The natural expressions of a sinner's mind and heart were no representation of God — and David was a sinner; and yet, though the mirror was thus broken, the bits into which sin had shivered it did not lose all their lustre; their smallness and dullness were not such as to make them incapable of reflecting any parts of the features of God. Far from it. The beauty of God's perfections was to be seen partially in many of them. Many of them still remained an index of the feelings of God; those feelings had come from Him, they were parts of Him, they had been formed and fashioned in His likeness; and though they had afterwards been deformed, and the truthfulness of their likeness to their Maker grievously impaired by the ravages of sin, they still retained enough of their original condition to point to God as their Author, and to represent to us, as in a *picture*, the realities which God has revealed to us in His holy word.

Yes, man was once like God, and though that likeness is much impaired, it is still there. What is good in man, "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report," these all shadow forth to us those glorious perfections which combine to make up the likeness of God. And who can doubt that a parent's feelings are of this character,—are the remnants of man's first estate—and that so, in the gushings forth of a parent's heart, may be seen some emblems of the mind of our Heavenly Father; that the natural expressions of parental affection are amongst the largest and brightest fragments of that glass which reflected the very image of God; that, in short, David's grief, his devotedness to his son, is a guide to us to the knowledge of God?

The words then of David, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" are, as it were, the echo of the words of the Father of all mercies, are a type to us of His mind, "Who willeth not the death of a sinner," and Who, in the infinite depths of His mercies, when He saw His people bent upon backsliding from Him and compassing Him about with lies and deceit, still so compassionated His perishing people as to feel for them that deep affection which fills His words, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim, how shall I deliver thee, Israel, how shall I make thee as Admah, how shall I set thee as Zeboim, mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together!" and Who, in the fulness of time, gave us, in the death of His only begotten Son, the proof that the words of David about Absalom contained the very feelings of God for us, His rebellious people.

And now I would point out in a few words what is the great and special value to us of such a text as this.

In the first place, it is an example of those revelations of God which speak with the greatest distinctness to that man's mind and heart who is taught by the Spirit of God—those revelations I mean of Himself which God has impressed upon the whole work of creation. All created being is one vast parable; everything around us is speaking to us in parabolic language the truths of God's word; and we men are witnessing to one another these same truths in the same language: the vine tells us of our union to Christ; a father's feeling tells us of the mercy of our Heavenly Father.

Secondly. Of all these revelations, none speak more distinctly and more influentially than this one. The feelings of a father, which we are permitted to look upon as a type

of the affections of our Heavenly Father, are amongst the most persuasive arguments to a fuller faith and a more child-like confidence.

To this I can bring the witness of my own experience. In ministering to a man who thought he had sinned away all hope of pardon, I found that I could not in any way shake his convictions of despair, till I opened to him the glorious truth that God Himself had made the feelings of a father a type of His own feelings for His children.

The subject of my ministrations was a father. This father had been sinned against by his own children, and yet had forgiven them; and when I explained to him fully what I meant, I touched, I found, a chord which vibrated through his whole spiritual being. His heart became (as it were) instinct with the music of Heaven. He seemed to hear the angels' joyous song over the repentant sinner. He had himself dealt very mercifully with prodigal children; and finding that he was permitted to see in his own affections for his children a type of his Heavenly Father's affection for him, a prodigal child, his soul melted within him, as he realised the blessed truth that our God is a most merciful Father. The sandy foundations of his despair were washed away by penitential tears, and, believing, he built his hopes on the solid rock — the mercies of God in Christ Jesus.

And, thirdly, such evidence of God's mercy is very precious to us, from the fact that there is so much in the New Testament to convince us that God is to us a consuming fire, and so little to help us to the belief that, for those who have enjoyed the privileges of the Christian and have abused them, there still remaineth a hope of pardon and forgiveness.

Such, then, are some of the considerations which give such exceeding value to this text. It strikingly opens to us a view of the truth that God's children have to deal with One who delights in mercy. It carries us to the very throne of Grace, and it there reveals to us Him, whose victory over sin and death we are now celebrating, our risen Lord, praying for us to His Almighty Father, pointing to His pierced hands and feet, and pleading for us that our burden has been laid on Him, and that He has borne our iniquities. And, my Brethren, could we but realise such a scene as this, — could we see the Saviour's tears and hear His pleadings, and listen to our Heavenly Father's sorrow for the death of His rebellious children, would it not be an unspeakable comfort to us? And this we all may do. Faith can travel out of this world, and, piercing the clouds and the firmament of the Heavens, can enter into the Holiest of Holies, and there witness that,

whilst the repentance of the sinner — the homeward journey of the prodigal son, awakens the sympathies of heaven, the persevering continuance in sin, and the bitter end of such a course in a hardened heart and a hopeless death, cause the angels to veil their faces, and God Himself — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — to be grieved; — yea, to mourn and sorrow, and so to give proof that the words of David, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son,” testify to us our Heavenly Father’s willingness to forgive us our sins, and that our impenitence is a contradiction of His purposes of mercy.

But if this be the wondrous truth we reach through these words of David, remember, my Brethren, that God’s willingness to pardon the sinner is no encouragement either to a lazy and careless repentance, or to indifference to their state whose hearts are still unmoved by the mercies of their God. The revelation that the death of a sinner is a cause of grief to our God, is a warning to us to turn away from wickedness, and to do that which is lawful and right, and to bring all our brethren to be of this mind. The very letters which spell this revelation, the mystery disclosed to us of the way in which God’s attributes of mercy and justice are reconciled, tell us this. For only consider how it is that God is become to us a Father of mercies instead of an avenging fire. Is it not because His only Son preferred death to our dying? Is it not because He satisfied the infinite justice of God upon the cross? Is it not because He pleads His merits? Is it not because He has placed His Holy Spirit in our hearts, and having engrafted us into the body of His Son, has adopted us as children, that, though we be Absaloms, He feels for us as David did for his rebel son — that, though we have broken our vows, and rebelled against Him, He would not that we should perish, but has given His ministers charge, as David gave his captains charge, to spare us, to preserve us, to save us from our sins, and to bring us back to Him in peace and safety? And can they who are thus circumstanced hope that God will not take vengeance, if we delay our repentance, or engage in it negligently? Impossible — the very guide to repentance is God’s goodness; it leads the willing heart captive to God’s will; and they who build their hopes of some future repentance on some unfounded views of God’s mercy, will find that every appeal God makes by His mercy to their hearts will only aggravate their guilt, and accumulate fresh woes upon them if they continue in impenitence.

There are indeed many and many tests of our real state. The true penitent is a man of sorrows and yet is no stranger to joy. He is ever looking at his sins, and he weeps. He is ever looking at Jesus, and he is then glad of heart; he is much in communion with God in prayer and the blessed Sacrament of his Lord's Body and Blood; his feelings pour themselves out in good works, and in acts of fellowship with his brethren in Christ. But there is one special test we must all apply to our state as a means of self-knowledge, and of ascertaining whether the revelation of mercy has had its right influence on our hearts.

The test I am speaking of is this — are we endeavouring to persuade those who are as yet strangers to the mercy of God—who have no faith and no love—to look to Jesus, and to seek through Him a share in those riches of grace which are treasured up in Him, the Saviour of the world?

If the Spirit of Grace is enabling us to say, “Abba Father,” if we are experiencing in our own souls the blessings of adoption, if our hearts are being filled with joy and peace in believing, we cannot but try to make others partakers of those blessings which are ours: the excellency of the gift we possess, the change our hard hearts have gone through, the desire to increase the number of our Lord's living disciples, the glory of His God and our God, all combine to make the conversion of the sinner an object very dear to our hearts. And it is to give effect to such desires, it is to bring into united action the sympathies of Christian brothers and sisters, it is to cast the net of the Gospel around one class at least of sinners, that our Society has been formed.

It has now existed for some years, and besides the great work of arousing attention to the fearful prevalence of the sins of the flesh, it has helped to found and to carry forward many institutions, which in different parts of our Church are striving to loosen the fearful bonds of lust, with which Satan has held captive so many souls.

I said that the object of this Association was the deliverance of souls in bondage to one special sin, but perhaps I ought to have said to all sins; for the special sin against which it carries on its warfare is of that nature that it fosters and cherishes the whole principle of sin, and opens channels, when thus fostered and cherished, for its expansion and development in every kind of evil doing.

They who founded this Association well knew this. They had correctly measured the nature and magnitude of the evil, before they marked out the means they thought best for its cure. They knew that no ordinary Christian graces were, to

speaking generally, adequate to such a work, and so they made the employment of singular zeal and love in the management of these Penitential Institutions a condition of their co-operation.

That great and holy Bishop, now, we trust, at rest, who first successfully roused the attention of the Church to the claims addressed to her on behalf of fallen women by the Saviour of sinners, had set before him for these sinners for whom he pleaded nothing short of a place at the feet of Jesus. The vision which inspired his soul was the scene in the Pharisee's house. The eye of his loving heart discerned thousands and thousands of women, no better than she had been who was called a sinner, standing behind Jesus weeping, washing His sacred feet with tears, wiping them with the hairs of their heads, kissing them, and anointing them with ointment. But he also well knew that such a triumph over Satan—such a mastering of the lusts of the flesh—such mortification of impure desires—such humble, grateful, adoring ministrations to Jesus, were the issue and rewards of overflowing zeal and love for souls, and the outacting of the abundant indwelling of the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit; and thus it has been determined that the agency to be employed, the only agency equal to such a work, and at all worthy of such functions, is that of “self-devoted women.”

Nor did the founders of this Association, when they thus testified their value for such services as I have just spoken of, forget that God is pleased to work His work of grace, to apply to the hearts of men the blessings purchased for them by His Son, through special vessels of His own election and appointment. That great truth, which is the one key-note thought of the services of last* Sunday morning and so of this week—the connection, viz., of the remission of sins with the ministry of God's word and sacraments, and the exceeding peril of the neglect of God's ordinance, as witnessed by the Holy Ghost through Moses†—has been wisely allowed to take its proper place in the regulations of this Association, which, after ruling that the discipline and internal management of each Penitentiary in connection with it shall be carried on through the agency of self-devoted women, has also added this further provision, “Under the guidance as to spiritual matters of a clergyman of the Church of England.”

Benevolence, my Brethren, may do much; but there are ministrations needful to the sinner's soul, which are beyond the reach of its powers.

* First Sunday after Easter.

† Numbers, xvi.

These are committed to persons who may be very inferior in spiritual attainments, not only to those devoted women whom we try to enlist in this work, but also to other Christians who are themselves far behind these faithful, loving servants of their Lord; but still they have been entrusted by God with special powers, and they cannot depute to others, who have not that authority our Lord has given to *them*, their own proper functions.

Nor do we find in the exceeding degradation of those to whom we are thus called to minister, and the exceeding blessedness of the change which may be, and often is, wrought in them, our only motives for such care in carrying forward our work.

In addition to these considerations, there is something in the circumstances, which are often the immediate occasion of these sins, which calls forth special sympathy and deep commiseration. These are the common lack of parental authority — the demoralising arrangements of the houses in which our poorer brethren are often obliged to live — their exclusion oftentimes, for various causes, from all the proper influences of the laws and ordinances of Christ's Kingdom — the little protection thrown around young women in many families — their exposure, when out of place and in distress, to the temptations which evil men are ever ready to place in their way — the low standard by which their sin is conventionally measured — and with this, the high barriers raised against their forsaking sin by those codes of morals which are not based on the creed of the Christian, and so are neither loyal to the strict laws of the King of kings, nor leavened by the consideration and compassionate sympathy He feels for sinners — the despair, in short, and hopelessness which are often made by hard hearts to issue out of such fallings away. Such are some of the circumstances to which I allude, and all these appeal to the mercy of those, who have learnt the gracious lesson that they have themselves no reason to be high-minded, but to fear, and who see in every fallen sister a memorial of what they themselves owe to God's mercy and grace — yea, all these things bid every humble Christian to take part in the blessed work of bringing to repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, all those who are still walking in the ways that woman, who was "a sinner," was enabled to forsake.

There is also another consideration, which supports and enforces every such appeal.

The lack of discipline in the Church has fearfully lowered the estimate of the heinousness of these offences. There was a

time, and that when our Lord had not long left this earth to return to His former glory, when His Church dealt with her children with the same kind of remedial treatment as parents use towards their children. When the members of the Church sinned against their common Head, the Lord Jesus, she chastised them, gave them over for awhile to Satan — cut them off from the comforts of the Christian — suffered them not even to enter her houses of prayer, or to use her Sacraments, till they had publicly confessed their sins, and been reconciled to God.

Instead of leaving the sinner, as he is now often left, to almost casual and chance treatment, she took pains to make him realise the fact that her Lord had entrusted to her the power of the Keys, and that her bindings and loosings were the means of bringing her children to Heaven. Nothing exemplifies more strikingly the very different state of things than the fact, that her chief duty then was to exclude the unholy from the privileges of the Church; and that now it is her more special work to persuade people that she has any privileges to give or withhold.

One effect of all this is, that persons yield to temptation with less fear of the consequences of sin, and realise with less distinctness what is the nature of the separation between an impenitent sinner and a merciful and holy GOD.

I need scarcely say that this loss of protection, of which I have spoken, this removal of the fences against sin, not only increases the peril of the sinner, but makes the duty to watch over and guard them, and to keep them within the fold, or to bring them back to it, if they have gone astray, the more clear and distinct.

I will only add one word in conclusion. Though there is so much in the disadvantages to which these poor fallen women have been often exposed, which determines our duty, and ought to engage our hearts, in this work of blessed mercy, I would rest my appeal to you on the ground on which the words of my text place us. The consideration which has most power to move our wills, and to fix them in zealous endeavours to carry out the high purposes of this Godly Association, is to be drawn from the fact, that to us it has been revealed that “sins as red as scarlet may be made white as snow,” and that God mourns to see the death of any of His children; that the agonised cry of David, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” is the type of the affection of the heart and mind of the Lord of heaven and earth; and that there is in this revelation that which draws forth from the

sinner tears of Godly sorrow, and inspires every broken-hearted penitent with a good hope that she too may have a place in the mercies of her God, and even be called in due season to the privilege of washing her Saviour's feet, and of making the house in which His presence rests, His holy Church, redolent with the perfume of her good works — the ministrations of a purified and loving heart to the necessities of those who are still in that bondage from which she has been delivered, are still strangers to that freedom which has now become the abiding portion of her body, soul, and spirit.

THE END.





